

Directors of Three Months and 22 Years Share OMS Workshop Experience

by [Michael Ridley](#), Chief Librarian, [University of Guelph](#) and [Murray Shepherd](#), University Librarian, [University of Waterloo](#)

From November 27 to December 1 we attended an Office of Management Services institute, *Library Management Skills Institute II: The Management Process*. This is notable since it was the first time in the experience of the two instructors (George Soete and [Kathryn Deiss](#)) that one, let alone two, library directors had been at any of their management institutes. Apparently attendance by directors is rare. Our experiences during the week suggest that there is considerable value for directors in this institute.

We both attended with senior management staff from our own and several other universities. This mixing of directors with their own management group made the week challenging and ultimately very rewarding. In previous workshops we had often heard staff from other libraries say "I wish my director or boss had come to hear these things." In our case the boss was there, the boss did hear the same things and the boss was a co-learner.

The result was an important team building experience. This shared experience has already been drawn upon as a touchstone to good ideas and management processes.

The First Day

Having said these positive things, we have to admit that the first day of the institute was trying. Our presence caused some tension. Even our own staff, who were aware that we would be at the institute, were uneasy; they expressed concern about being open, honest, and free with their director present. Some other participants may have been cautious too. There was some concern that a director would come to such institutes; some were looking for an ulterior motive.

One participant said it showed "courage" by the directors. This comment actually made us uneasy. What were we in for? As a result, on the second day, the group agreed to a new ground rule for the week: the level playing field.

Team Building

At the libraries of both the Universities of Guelph and Waterloo there is extensive management restructuring in process. Waterloo is moving slowly but deliberately toward a team-based management structure. Guelph's new director (three months) is in the initial stages of an organizational renewal program to introduce new structures and processes to the library. We had the additional advantage of having worked together and explored contemporary leadership ideas during the previous five years.

The OMS institute was an opportunity for senior management groups to work together, to learn common skills, and to test key concepts and ideas that could form the basis of the management philosophy of both organizations.

Inter-Institutional Cooperation

Because many participants were from three neighboring institutions (Waterloo, Guelph, and Wilfrid Laurier) that are engaged in an innovative program of inter-institutional collaboration, there was an added dimension to the institute.

The institute offered an opportunity for staff at the three institutions to observe each other in operation and to see the commitment of the senior executives to collaborative learning and open processes. It was an important, visible opportunity for the directors to "walk the talk."

Mental Models

Much of the institute was framed by ideas of the learning organization as articulated by Peter Senge (The Fifth Discipline). While we were familiar with Senge's work, it was fascinating to see it revealed during the week.

It was particularly interesting to address issues surrounding the idea of mental models (assumptions we have about how things work or how we should act). Mental models have a strong effect on how we manage. Recognizing and understanding our own mental models are significant personal challenges.

The OMS institute also presented the concept of the "single loop learner" (as described in Chris Argyris' article "Teaching Smart People How to Learn"). The main idea expressed here is that certain behaviors are reinforced by success. These same behaviors can become unconscious barriers to learning. Clearly this speaks specifically to directors. This was revealed in our sessions, with our staff as both participants and spectators, as we confronted our own mental models. We wrestled, sometimes almost helplessly, with assumptions that lead us into actions or decisions that were ultimately counterproductive to the role-playing exercise or to the group work we were engaged in during the sessions. It was exactly the right kind of exposure and learning experience. Our mental models were being gently, but resolutely, dismantled.

Co-learners

The best learning occurs in these intense moments of revelation or flashes of understanding and awareness. Unquestionably this was of great personal value to us; it was also important that this experience occurred in the presence of our senior management group. We recognized, first hand, the textbook declaration, the importance of lifelong learning. We realized that all staff must continually learn, retool themselves, and open up for new experiences and new ideas. Including us.

Some also might say we publicly displayed our shortcomings or revealed weaknesses. For our staff and others in the institute it helped to build stronger relationships; relationships built on trust gathered through challenging collective experiences.

Did we feel vulnerable or exposed? Did we feel defensive or abused (especially when the group engaged in a lively round of "library administration bashing")? No, quite the opposite. Our leadership roles were strengthened and enhanced by becoming co-learners.

Why don't more directors attend these institutes? In part we think it is because they feel they already know the material (or should know the material). A more significant barrier is concern about learning with other staff members and risking the public revelations that inevitability comes during intense and rewarding learning experiences.

Why should more directors attend? We all recognize that it is important for directors to continually

learn. More important, however, it is worthwhile for senior management and administrative groups in a library to engage in common, team-building experiences focused on real issues. The OMS institutes are ideal forums for these opportunities.

©*ARL: A Bimonthly Newsletter of Research Library Issues and Actions* 185 (April 1996). Washington, DC: Association of Research Libraries.

[Table of Contents for Issue 185](#) | [Other OMS Articles](#) | [ARL Newsletter Home](#)



[ARL Home](#)

© Association of Research Libraries, Washington, DC

Web Design by [Kim Maxwell](#)

Maintained by [ARL Web Administrator](#)

Last Modified: Thursday, July 10, 1996 - 08:47:08 AM